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ABSTRACT

A research review examined approaches on how to tap into writing so that students will be motivated to want to express their thoughts on paper. In addition, interviews were conducted with a well known principal and teacher of an inner city school in Chicago, Illinois and with a professor of writing at Murray State University in Kentucky. A writing questionnaire was also given to five fourth- and fifth-grade teachers. Findings suggest that writing can and should begin at an earlier age, while the child is fresh with many ideas. Also, the teaching of writing is important in the public schools, and as such, teachers should try many different learning experiences and teaching methods to encourage students to write. (The summaries of two interviews and the writing questionnaire with results are included; a 15-item bibliography is attached.) (KEH)

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"How To Tap Into Writing?"

by
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Purpose:

To inform the reader that the skill of writing is being neglected in our school systems. Also, to justify a need to teach the use of writing across the curriculum.

Problem:

Most teachers do not know how to start students to writing. Many feel they hit brickwalls when starting writing activities. The Writing Process does not fully develop for them.

So how do we as educators influence students to write? How do we tap into writing? Where does writing begin? How do we direct students to let their thoughts flow freely from their minds to pen to paper, especially when they constantly replied, "I have nothing to say".

Most of the teachers at any school feel every minute needs to be applied to these basic skills and that adding more to the curriculum is only deterimental to the students. They are shouting, "there is no time for writing in my school day." So, why should teachers teach writing?

Review of Related Literature:

According to Gerald Camp in "Research Writing Develops Cognitive Thinking Skills," "writing is a way to explore and question, as well as to gain control over and exhibit knowledge of subject matter. Writing engages the

imagination, intellect, and emotions and encourages articulation of those attitudes, skills, and values necessary for effective learning in most disciples." (Camp, pp.149-150) He feels that writing provides students with thoughts and data that they can refer back to in the future and rely on as references.

Erika Lindemann believes good writing is an economic power. She is convinced of its enduring benefits for students. Lindemann also believes that writing is an important social skill: "The ability to write is important because language is indispensable to society" (Lindemann, p.5). She goes on to say that writing can help students solve problems. If a student writes his/her problem, many times a solution is reached at the end of the writing. We can also discover who we are through writing. (Lindemann, p.5).

Donald Murray also believes that writing is therapy. He says, "We write because we need to write, and the act of writing rarely solves our problems, but it is a way of dealing with problems and of achieving a momentary distance from them." (Murray, p.217) This approach will work with our students since the majority of them are from broken homes and their lives are filled with personal problems.

Calkins states in her book, The Art of Teaching Writing, that "Human beings have a deep need to represent their experience through writing." (Calkins, p.3) She

feels we have stifled the reasons for writing; we have been more interested in form rather than content. She believes that much learning takes place during the writing process. Many students are able to recite facts back to a teacher through traditional learning, but few can write their thoughts. The writing process involves thinking skills, writing skills and language skills. Writing is much needed in the classroom. (Calkins, p.3).

So how do we fit writing into an already full day? The real question is how can we afford not to fit writing into our day? According to Judit E. Egar writing is essential in the classroom. She allowed time in her classroom for writing because she believes that "the teaching of writing can become the basis from which all other Language Arts concepts could emerge." (Egan, p.97). She did not have to make time for writing when she once realized writing was not an isolated subject but a subject filtered throughout the curriculum. Before, her classes in Language Arts emphasized reading; now they emphasize writing which exceeds the reading standards she used as goals. She stated, "When children write, they read and more importantly become critical readers since they are authors themselves. (Egan, p.98).

I feel research strongly encourages teachers to provide writing opportunities in the classroom. Teachers need to be made aware of its importance and zero in on it utilizing as much writing as possible.

Some stress the way to tap into writing is through the reading of good literature. Others believe good writing develops from hours and hours spent on writing stemmed from many learning experiences. All research stated that teachers needed to create an environment that will encourage children to write, and writing should begin as soon as possible in kindergarten or 1st grade.

According to Lucy Calkins, "We can tap the human urge to write if we help students realize that their lives are worth writing about. When writing becomes a personal project for children, teachers are freed from cajoling, pushing, pulling, and motivating. The teaching act changes. With a light touch we can guide and extend children's growth in writing. Also, our teaching becomes more personal, and this makes all the difference in the world"(Calkins, p.6).

Ms Calkins believes children can write and read at a very young age. Teachers need to begin responding to children' first writing experiences just as parents respond to a child's first speech. The knowledge they bring to school provides them with tools enough to write stories, shopping lists and phone messages. Not all children begin

with the mastery of every sound-symbol relationship, but most do begin knowing some of the shapes and names. Many, however, begin writing before they know any shapes or names (Calkins, p.36-37).

Mrs. Calkins also stated the sooner the teachers begin writing, the less motivation needed to enchance writing. "Students will learn to write by writing, and by living with the sense of - I am one who writes"-This self-perception will give children the eyes to see, and they will notice the conventions of written language everywhere. They will learn punctuation and spelling from billboards and environmental labels and books. Writing must begin as soon as possible" (Calkins, p.47).

Eileen Tway's belief is that good writing develops from good reading, and children are already equipped with enough oral language when they start school that they are capable of writing on their own using "invented spelling" (Tway, p.50).

Mrs. Tway feels children are ready to write from their earliest school days, and if teachers will provide students with good literature to be read aloud to them then children's language skills will expand, thus effecting their writing skills (Tway, p.52).

In 1971 Chomsky stated, "Writing in the primary grades is important in it's own right as a means of communication, recordkeeping, self-expression, and learning through the

organization of thoughts on paper. Writing is also an important route to reading proficiency. Their written vocabulary develops out of the oral vocabulary, the words for which they have acquired meaning. One of the best ways to extend children's experiences with words is through reading aloud to them from the best that children's literature has to offer. When children are read to, they are experiencing someone's creative writing"(Chomsky p.297).

Another article by Susan Kostelny stressed writing should be introduced as early and with as much emphasis as reading instruction. She believes there is a close relationship between the two processes, and believes that the teaching and practicing of one skill enhances learning in the other skill (Kostelny,p.156).

Elizabeth Franklin stated in "Reading and Writing Stories: Children creating meaning" that children will learn how to express themselves through reading and writing stories. Again, she stresses that this should begin at an early age. Her research was done on a group of Kindergarten and 1st grade Hispanic bilingual children. She is a firm believer writing begins in these early years of a child's life. She strongly believes by reading and writing stories children learn more about themselves, and our world. "In the process of exploring and generating ideas in story, they also learned to read and write more effectively" (Franklin, p.189).

Now that I know research backs my belief that writing is important and that it should begin either in Kindergarten or 1st grade, I began searching for ways to tap into writing so that students would want to express their thoughts on paper.

The hottest item being discussed among researchers that will tap into writing, or pull children into writing is the journals. A study by Manning stated that in 1985-1986 twenty 1st graders were given journals and they wrote in them daily. This study took place in an inner city school, in Birmingham, Alabama. The students were given 30 minute blocks of time throughout the year. At the end of the year the journals were collected and reviewed. As Manning expected in 1st graders many of the beginning of the year entries were pictures, scribbles, and copied text from classroom charts and books. But as the students became more proficient writers, their entries contained less drawings. She also noticed that all journals contained at least one entry of the retelling of a story they had either read or heard someone tell to them. The entries in these journals were not at the same developmental stage either; some children constructed stories, others poems, some had drawings with captions underneath explaining the picture.
In summary the study proved that "1st graders can and will write in journals, and can select their own topics. They enjoyed journal writing and gained more confidence in their

ability to use written language during the school year" (Manning, p.314).

Another article by Strackbein and Tillman stated that journals are the one best way to tap into writing because it requires little planning and no publication effort. Journal writing proved to be worthwhile and very enjoyable to students in all grades. It allows for communication between teacher and student in a sharing, writing way. With journal writing there are no right or wrong answers. Students will soon learn, teachers are genuinely interested in what they have to say. The teacher must learn to be aware of the fact that there will be mistakes in journal writings but must focus more attention on the intent of the student's effort. This is not to say "no correcting", just keep it limited, remember "a journal is for a private audience, not a critical public" (Strackbein and Tillman, p.29).

An article by Leo Ruth also suggested journal writing as a way to tap into writing. He strongly believes we as educators need to "give more attention to the process of writing, helping children shape their ideas and stories as they create them rather than waiting to correct the products of their efforts." (Ruth, p.759). Mr. Ruth strongly believes that journals will allow children to freely express themselves, but if teachers bloody them up with red marks journals will soon lose their effectivness. He also stressed teachers should read childen's writing aloud if

permission is granted from the child. Children can learn from each other.

An article that appeared in The Reading Teacher last February discussed what one teacher did to encourage her students to write about reality. First of all she had students just write anything that came to their minds. Many students simply wrote about a television plot they had seen the night before. This was when it concerned the teacher that students needed some personal involvement in their writing. She began to wonder how she would remedy the situation.

First she began by giving recognition to students who would write about actual events. This would encourage others to do the same. Then she, as the teacher, would write with the children everyday. She would write about different events that had happened in her life; She found when she would share her writings aloud with the class several of the students would write about similar incidents. She would also try to select topics that she knew students would enjoy writing about. Mrs. Clark stressed that books were the emotional link in her writing program. She would read many books to her students; books that the children could relate to their own lives. She felt that books were the "connecting link between writing and reading". (Clark, p.416). The last thing Mrs. Clark said educators needed to remember when trying to enhance writing is,

patience. Her original purpose was to encourage students to write about reality, however, she discovered that there was no one technique that would always be successful. "As a teacher of young children, I've learned that patience and consitency pays off in the long run. Different books, different topics, different characters, and different approaches ensure that each child is touched and inspired to speak (Clark, p.416).

The last piece of research that I reviewed stated that children learn to write from writing everyday. The author, Robert Gaskins, did believe journals were very effective if used properly. He stressed that positive reinforcement and constructive comments need to be given to students about their writing. He felt that many teachers placed too much emphasis on content, organization, spelling, and grammar. He believed students need to learn how to write their thoughts down, absent the fear of spelling and organizing everything correctly. He believed a good writing program would emphasize the process of writing as well as heighten student's self esteem (Gaskins, p.754).

To understand more about the approaches on how to tap into writing two interviews were conducted, one with Mrs. Marva Collins, the other Dr. Fred Cornelius. Each expressed their own approach to teaching writing.

Collins Approach:

According to Ms. Marva Collins, well known principal and teacher of an inner city school in Chicago, IL., all children can write. Talking with her on the telephone she explained to me her belief on how to tap into writing with children. She believes from an early age children are great programmers and performers. Children can watch television and program the entire show back to anyone who is willing to listen. She feels educators should build on this art of programming. In 1960, she began teaching in Chicago's public school system. Fourteen years later frustrated and disgusted, Mrs. Collins quit. She was sick and tired of seeing children pushed through a school system where little or no learning was taking place. She left the public education system to found Westside Preparatory School in Chicago's inner city.

She feels at a very young age (3 or 4 year olds) children should begin hearing and reading the classics of literature. She said, "People visiting Westside are shocked to see three and four year olds reading and reciting Shakespeare, quoting from Socrates, or performing plays by Euripides; it is not something they expect, especially from a so-called inner city school. But our children learn that the slum does not exist inside of them, and that they must work many times harder than they ever have, within our school walls, in order to combat the influence of the moral decadence outside."

She believes students enter school systems with this wonderful power of programming already developed within them; just waiting for someone to nourish it and further develop this skill. The average four and five year old child, according to Mrs. Collins, goes to school with a speaking vocabulary of 4,000 or more words, and yet the average reader used by five and six year olds contains and introduces only 70 words during their first year. Ms. Collins feels that this is where our public school systems fail; instead of building on this already highly developed vocabulary and an art to program in their minds, educators tend to begin far behind what students are already capable of doing; allowing their God given talent to slowly fall by the wayside not to be recaptured until years later; some lost forever.

Mrs. Collins believes all children can learn, read and write. She said "The teaching staff at Westside spend as much time as it takes to accomplish this. We never tell a student that something they write is wrong or ridiculous, our retort in such case is - let's proofread this." And she said they have to do this many times.

How does Ms. Collins tap into writing? She believes good writing comes from exposure to good reading literature. The more students read the more they learn good writing skills. She emphasizes that children should read lots and lots of good works of literature. She stresses the

Classics in all her grades. She starts her three and four year old students on Emerson's Essays. She teaches them at an early age how to exprerience good reading and writing. She makes it come alive for them. She teaches them how to apply it to their lives and it becomes their own.

Mrs. Collins stressed you only can develop good writing from good experiences with well-written literature.

She also teaches her students to value what they write. It is a part of them. "Our students will tell you that they do not put graffiti on buildings because they only write on things they can sell; you cannot take someone's building, they will tell you, and send it to a publisher" (Marva Collins)

Mrs. Collins feels all she does in her school is focus on these skills all children have, nurture them, and build upon them. Great writing comes from exposure to great reading material according to Mrs. Collins.

Cornelius Approach:

A professor at Murray State University explained to me how he feels is the best way to tap into writing. Dr. Fred Cornelius believes students need to write, write, and write. He believes good writing is developed from writing everyday. The more a person writes the better writer you become. The more mistakes you make the more you learn how to correct them. Dr. Cornelius stated that students need lots and lots of experiences to enhance their writing ability. The more

experiences they have, the more material they have to draw their thoughts from so that they may write. He believes once a student has developed a good, strong background to build his/her writing on, the better writer he will become. He stressed if students are exposed to many different experiences, and are given quality writing time, then good writing will develop.

Dr. Cornelius would like to see more and more teachers using the writing process in the classrooms. He feels this is the best approach to tap into writing for all students.

The writing process might be described as having several stages including prewriting, writing, responding, revising, editing, developing skills with the conventions of writing, evaluating, and postwriting. While the writing program should include opportunities for the students to work in all these areas and to have learning experiences in each of them, the stages should never be thought of as necessarily sequential. Some writing assignments may not require students to work in all of the different writing stages. Dr. Cornelius believes that students should do many informal writings in journals or logs, and brief written exercises on any thing the student would like to write on to help attain greater fluency. The amount of attention given to each stage will vary from student to student. But he feels teachers should provide experiences in all stages, one time or another, to the students. A writing program should

acquaint students with the stages experienced authors and writers go through in composing, revising, and publishing their work.

Since my research only involves how to get students to write I will explain what Dr. Cornelius said on prewriting only.

Prewriting is the first stage of the writing process and perhaps the most important stage for younger children. This is where motivation is so important. Prewriting includes any experience or activity that will motivate a student to write. Dr. Cornelius believes many teachers skip or neglect to provide students with prewriting activities, they (the teachers) just expect students to write without any motivation. The end result, either poor writing occurs or a student who now hates writing. Prewriting should begin from the time they are aware of having to write and the time they begin to write.

According to Dr. Cornelius all children want to communicate with others and express their thoughts; many just feel what they have to say is not important enough to write on paper. The students begin to realize their writing is important when they can identify with what they are writing. This identification occurs through prewriting experiences; with topics they can relate to.

Students also need confidence that they are capable of expressing themselves on paper. Some students are afraid to write anything down with fear of some teacher finding every mistake in what they have written. Teachers can reverse this learned behavior by focusing in on what the student did right

instead of wrong. Building up a student's confidence will not only tap into the writing ability of that student but will also help them achieve correctness in their writing. (Strickland, p.426)

I decided it was also important to see how my colleagues felt about writing. So after returning back to my school I gave each of the fourth and fifth grade teachers a writing questionnaire; the questions and results are as follows:

1. Define creative writing?

   Teacher 1 - Creative writing should include free expression of recent and past experiences which have left an emotional impact on the person.

   Teacher 2 - A person who has the power to write stories or a poem that he creates.

   Teacher 3 - a) The ability to use one's imagination to create a story.
   b) To write a story from real experiences.
   c) To express ones self through writing.

   Teacher 4 - Writing opportunities which encourage self-expression.

   Teacher 5 - Writing your thoughts and feelings, expressing one's self.

2. Do you presently allow creative writing or free writing in your classroom?

   Teacher 1 - yes

   Teacher 2 - yes

Teacher 3 - Only if it's incorporated into the lesson, such as reading or spelling.

Teacher 4 - yes - free writing

Teacher 5 - once in a while.

3. How many times a week do your students write? (free write)

Teacher 1 - two or three times a week.

Teacher 2 - three times a week.

Teacher 3 - usually not weekly. Again depends upon the lesson.

Teacher 4 - three times a week.

Teacher 5 - every once in a while.

4. How much time is allowed for this writing?

Teacher 1 - 15 to 20 minutes

Teacher 2 - 30 minutes

Teacher 3 - as much time as needed for students to complete the activity.

Teacher 4 - 30 minutes

Teacher 5 - 20 minutes.

5. How do you think students feel about writing?

Teacher 1 - They enjoy writing if they do not have to make any corrections.

Teacher 2 - Most of the students enjoy it.

Teacher 3 - Some enjoy it; others are not as fond of it.

Teacher 4 - They are extremely enthusiastic-love it!

Teacher 5 - They do not like it !

6. Do you as a teacher like to write?

Teacher 1 - Fair

Teacher 2 - Yes

Teacher 3 - Sometimes

Teacher 4 - No - I enjoy writing letters, when I have time.

Teacher 5 - No.

7. How often should students write?

Teacher 1 - When they need to do so and regularly at intervals of twice a week.

Teacher 2 - Daily

Teacher 3 - Depends upon the students and the skills they possess. Some students have great difficulty expressing themselves.

Teacher 4 - Frequently, at least three times weekly.

Teacher 5 - At least once a week.

8. What kind of writing do students do in your classroom?

Teacher 1 - They tell stories about things they have drawn or traced.

Teacher 2 - Create stories about various things.

Teacher 3 - Again depends on the lesson. So do sentences or short stories with their spelling

words, or occasionally when a reading lesson deals with the matter.

Teacher 4 - Free writing - They write in their journals.

Teacher 5 - Writing complete sentences using spelling words, answering written questions.

According to the results, writing is taking place in three out of five classrooms in our school. However, I question the validity of teachers one and two. I know for a fact that Teacher 4 is using journals in her classroom; therefore I feel her answers to the questionnaire are accurate. I also feel that Teacher 3 and 5 answered the questions accurately. My own observations differ from the results of this questionnaire. I believe that writing is being neglected in our schools. Many teachers are not aware of its importance, and therefore steer from teaching it across the curriculum.

Discussion of Findings:

This completes my research information. It is quite obvious to see that Mrs. Marva Collins' and Dr. Fred Cornelius' ideas on how to tap into writing are pretty much in tune with the reviewed literature. All agreed writing can and should begin at an earlier age; while the child is fresh with many ideas of his/her own. All stress the importance of teaching writing in our public schools.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Whatever method is used to enhance writing whether it is through the reading of books, free writing, journal writing, or selected topic writing students need to believe that writing is valuable. Students need to see teachers write, make mistakes, and correct them. If teachers will share their writing successes and failures with students, then they are more likely to develop an appreciation for writing.

Unless students view writing as important, they will tend to produce samples of writings that are lifeless and dull. Students need to feel they have something to say and it is important to learn how to express one's self on paper.

All teachers need to try many different learning experiences, and teaching methods whether through books, journals, etc...to encourage students to write. There is no one certain way. Writing time should be established in each classroom with the teacher writing also. Teachers need to be made aware that reading and writing are closely related skills. Writing is an important tool or skill for all subjects areas. Last, but not least, if you want students to write, then they have to view it as something valuable and practice writing everyday. They must write and write to become good writers.

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